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Italian judges in papal plot trial keep working, even during recess

By Paul Henze
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Though the papal plot trial is formally in recess during the traditional Italian summer holiday, presiding Judge Severino Santiapichi, Prosecutor Antonio Marini, and other court officials have taken very little time off.

ANALYSIS

They have used the recess to delve deeper into the connections among more than a dozen Turks, in Europe and their homeland, who in one way or another have been implicated in the case.

During the first 10 weeks of the Rome trial, which began at the end of May, Mehmet Ali Agca, the Pope's convicted assailant, cited previously-known and new names in his often confusing testimony.

Origin of the alleged plot disputed

The murky aspect of Mr. Agca's testimony has raised

many questions. What has been his motive? Is he insane? Is he deliberately trying to undermine what he told Judge Ilario Martella in 1983? Has he somehow been bought off by the KGB, the Soviet secret police, on promise of eventual rescue, as some Polish émigrés suggest? Or is the so-called Bulgarian connection a fiction, the invention of SISMI, the Italian intelligence service, working in conjunction with the United States Central Intelligence Agency?

Soviet and Bulgarian journalists and officials continue to insist that the current confusion is a CIA plot, and that the May 1981 attempt on Pope John Paul II's life was inspired by the US. But their arguments have no wide currency.

"These Italian judges are no fools," declares Victor Pisano, a Rome lawyer who has specialized in study of Bulgarian links to terrorism in Italy. "They would not have started this trial if they had not felt that they had a good case and one that rests on more than Agca's testimony. But they may not have reckoned with Agca's theatrics, though they made it easy for him by giving him such a prominent role in the first weeks of the proceedings."

Prosecutor Marini went to Turkey on July 22 and conferred at length with Turkish judicial officials who have been involved in the whole complex of investigations and trials of Bulgarian-supported Turkish mafia figures and men who were linked to Agca.

Italians question two alleged accomplices of Agca

Marini then interrogated Omer Ay who is imprisoned in Elazig. Mr. Ay's name was one of the first that came to light as a possible accomplice of Agca in St. Peter's Square. After two days of interrogating Ay, Marini told

the press, "Omer Ay's evidence is serious enough to change the course of the trial."

After preliminary interrogation in Istanbul, Marini arranged for Sedat Sirri Kadem, a man who until now had figured only on the dim margins of the case, to be flown to Rome to confront Agca. Mr. Kadem claimed to have leftist political views and acknowledged knowing Agca as a boyhood friend, but denied all involvement in Agca's criminal activities.

On meeting Kadem in Rome, Agca declared: "Yes, this is Sedat Sirri Kadem, the fourth Turk involved in the attack." (Agca has said that Ay, his boyhood friend Oral Celik, and Kadem were with him the day he shot the Pope.)

Kadem replied angrily, "You are inventing lies so you can retract them later. You are confusing even yourself with your fabrications."

The only thing that clearly emerged from the ensuing confrontation, unless Marini was pursuing an aim that

has not yet become publicly apparent, is that either Agca or Kadem is lying.

Truth hard to get at

"There has been a great deal of lying going on at this trial," says a veteran Turkish journalist, "and it is not only by Agca." This man has no doubt about Agca's sanity.

"He is bargaining," he says, "in a desperate attempt to try to improve his situation. Here he is — sentenced to death by hanging in Turkey and life imprisonment in Italy — he feels he has nothing to lose by employing any tactic that might ease his plight."

Reputed Turkish smuggler wanted in Rome

A man whom both Turks and Italians see as a key figure in the case remains to be heard from: Bekir Celenk. He was released by Bulgaria and sent back to Turkey in early July.

Mr. Celenk, along with reputed Turkish-mafia godfather Abuzer Ugurlu and more than 20 alleged accomplices, is a defendant in a trial in Ankara, Turkey. New charges that Celenk supported smuggling, subversion, and terrorism have been added to the indictment against him. Turkish legal rules made it impossible for Italian prosecutor Marini to see him during his recent visit.

"I definitely have to interrogate Bekir Celenk," Marini declared on leaving Istanbul in early August. He said he would return to Turkey in mid-September to



Agca's testimony is a trial to Rome judges

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Turk in the Netherlands interrogated

The Italian officials in charge of the Rome trial have also interrogated another Turk, Samet Arslan, in prison in the Netherlands. He had come from West Germany and was arrested on May 14 this year, the last day of the Pope's Dutch visit. Little is known about him, and his only link to Agca is a very tenuous one: the gun he carried when he was arrested reportedly came from the same batch as Agca's. Some observers suspect that Mr. Arslan's venture was deliberately arranged to reinforce the impression that a group of right-wing Turks were still pursuing the Pope.

After weeks of testimony, the most concrete evidence of Agca's Bulgarian connection remains the list of telephone numbers he carried on him when caught in St. Peter's Square on May 13, 1981, and his admission during his initial interrogation — confirmed by the passport he carried — that he had spent two months in Bulgaria in the summer of 1980.

The trial in Rome will reconvene in mid-September and is expected to continue for several months.

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